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SUBJECT: MUSLIM OUTREACH: US EMBASSY PRAGUE HOSTS FIRST RAMADANIFTAR

¶1. Summary. On October 25, Ambassador William Cabaniss hosted an Iftar dinner at his residence, the first-ever held by the Embassy. Nearly fifty Muslim diplomats and business leaders attended, including Ambassadors from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Yemen and Afghanistan. Noticeably absent from the Iftar were members of the Islamic Foundations in Prague and Brno, who had sent a letter explaining that they would not attend because of their dissatisfaction with US policy toward Muslim countries. While it would have been preferable that representatives of the Islamic Foundation attended, the invitation - and response - did open the possibility for future dialogue. End Summary.

¶2. Egyptian Shaykh Karem El-Badawy, the head Imam in the Czech Republic, assisted in the preparations for the Iftar, even meeting with Ambassador Cabaniss prior to the event and providing prayer rugs and dates for the dinner itself. El-Badawy was not able to attend the actual event and lead the prayer, most likely due to pressure from the Islamic Foundation Committee. Instead, the Ambassador of Afghanistan offered the prayer to break the fast at sundown. Many in attendance were moved that the program included not only a taped recitation of the Koran, but also one-minute "Call to Prayer," which was provided by Shaykh El-Badawy. Many diplomats said that they looked forward to next year's Iftar as well.

¶3. During his remarks, Ambassador Cabaniss expressed his Ramadan greeting and his hope that the iftar would be a beginning step toward better communication and understanding. The Ambassador of Afghanistan then gave his own impromptu remarks on the importance of dialogue, as well as the positive changes that are occurring in the Islamic world, including the rights of women in his own country. He expressed appreciation to the Ambassador for our effort to improve understanding of important Muslim traditions.

¶4. Comment. We have already seen an increased openness in our relations with the Muslim community here as a result of our Iftar dinner. The Ambassador has commented that Muslim Ambassadors with whom he had a more formal relationship now approach him at receptions and other events, and some of out attendees, such as representatives from Radio Free Europe Arabic and Afghan services have expressed interest in partnering with the Embassy on other Muslim outreach events. Even the organized Islamic community has thawed a bit; following the Iftar, Shaykh El-Badawy expressed his interest in inviting Ambassador Cabaniss to the Islamic Foundation in Prague Mosque for a tour and meeting with members of the mosque committee. It should be noted that El-Badawy works for the Egyptian Ministry of Awkaf and has been in the Czech Republic for the past two years, as the only trained Imam in the country. (Note: El-Badawy estimated that there are approximately 10,000 Muslims in the Czech Republic, but only about 500 regularly attend mosque services. He said that many Arabs moved to the Czech Republic in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly when the communist-government sponsored Palestinian rejectionist groups. However, he lamented that the majority of Arabs who have been living in the Czech Republic for a number of years, and who have married Czechs, are secular and don't have a connection with the mosque.) In addition to taking Shaykh El-Badawy up on his invitation, and arranging a meeting to discuss the Islamic Foundation's concerns, Embassy Prague plans on holding another Iftar next year, as well as other cultural events in order to improve communication between the embassy and Czech Muslim community. End Comment.

CABANISS